

Complete by OnlyInAutumn

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Alternating, slowish burn

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Summary:

After the events of the fall, Nancy is coping and Jonathan is the only one who understands how to help her. They grow back together again (with a little meddling from Will).

1. Distraction

Author's Note:

I imagine this story will have around 7 chapters. To be honest, I've already written most of the first five in the past 24 hours, so who knows. I'm addicted to Jonathan/Nancy and not seeking treatment. Season 2, where are you?

Enjoy!

When she heard the kitchen cabinets being rustled around in, Nancy closed her book and shuffled down the stairs to confirm her belief of what was going on. Her suspicions had been right all along. Her brother was up on top of the countertop searching around for anything edible. Will, who had come over around noon, was resting against the sink, watching as his friend with patience.

"What are you two up to?" Nancy asked, folding her arms over her chest, leaning against the wall as she watched them both be startled by her sudden appearance. They must have forgotten that she was home.

Mike, who knew he was caught in the act, came to a still, frozen in place. His smile dropped, first reaction being to say in a stone cold voice, fearful, "Please don't tell mom."

She wouldn't.

Not then.

Not after all that happened.

Her and Mike had grown closer again after years of leading separate lives, the years in age between them acting as a rift as Nancy had gotten older, found her own friends and interests , and stopped hanging around with her younger brother. Her outlook had changed after the events of the fall, however, and Nancy wasn't going to jeopardize any of that. She had realized for the first time how

precious relationships and time with people she cared about could be.

Needless to say, the holiday season had been rough for her, not knowing what do to without Barb there, the one who she had spent all her time with, the one person who knew all her secrets and didn't judge her. They used to spend every waking hour with each other from Thanksgiving through Christmas shopping for gifts, wrapping, decorating cakes for parties, and the list went on for ages. But then? Nothing. No Barb. Just a wake of despair and mourning left behind.

Instead of all the things she had become accustomed to doing with her best friend, she ended up with a lot of idle time on her hands and was desperately trying to fill the empty spaces of time until she could be distracted by school and homework again. It being only two days after Christmas, there was still a long time left until school started up again, much to her dismay.

"You're looking in all the wrong places," Nancy slyly informed him, knowing the hiding spots since their mom trusted her to not stuff her face with chocolate and other sweets, unlike her little brother, who would eat anything in sight. Her father would say something like *he's a growing boy* but her mom was adamant about the fact that spending hours in the waiting room while Mike got his teeth drilled because of cavities was not how she was going to spend her time. "Come on, get down from there."

Mike hopped down, landing on the floor in an uncoordinated manner.

"We could make something instead," Nancy offered, browsing the cabinets where Mike had just been, noting the abundance of leftover flour and sugar. There would definitely be more hiding around, given that the New Year's Eve party that her parents threw every year was a few days away and her mom went on a baking rampage. "What do you want?"

Both Mike and Will exchanged a look, causing Nancy to suddenly feel out of place. "Or...if you don't want me here—"

"We do," Mike interrupted. He turned to Will and asked, "Right?"

Will gave one nod of the head. “Right.”

With the promise of baked goods and their parents out of the house until the late evening, they were not going to pass up the opportunity. Neither would Nancy. A few hours of preoccupation would be welcomed.

“Okay, then,” she decided, fingernails drumming against the wood, recipes spinning around in her head. “Chocolate chip cookies or brownies?”

They looked indecisive, weighing the options in their heads. Mike rubbed his chin methodically, imitating a man in recent movie he saw. Nancy opted for the middle ground. “How about both then?”

Both their faces lit up. Will was the polite one and said, “Yes, please.”

Nancy turned, knowing the hiding spots all too well, and brought out the secret stash of chocolate chips after instructing the two boys to turn their heads away. She got out all the other ingredients and started to get to work with the mixing bowl.

The boys chatted with her, Mike seemingly more curious about her life than Will was. He would pipe in here and there, but mostly watched the interactions between Mike and Nancy. She had somehow forgotten what nice of a time it could be to hang out with Mike, and made a mental note that she needed to do it more often before she was out of the house and in college.

Well, hopefully college. Nancy still had no clue what she wanted to do yet, though she had the gpa to get in wherever she pleased. But anything that would get her away from Hawkins and all that had happened there was the option she was going to take without a second thought, even if her mom would try to persuade her to stick around.

She couldn’t stay.

She couldn’t imagine that anyone in her position would want to stay.

At one point, Mike excused himself to go to the upstairs bathroom, leaving Nancy and Will alone in the kitchen together. To her surprise,

Will took the opportunity to become more talkative now that Mike was absent.

"Do you think you'll still see my brother?"

Nancy looked up after sliding the desserts into the oven. "Jonathan?" She tucked some hair behind her ear. "I guess so, yeah."

"I think he misses you," Will mumbled, looking down at his shoes, laces partly untied. Maybe he realized that he shouldn't have said that. Nancy wondered if Jonathan had confided in him about her.

Nancy moved to the sink, beginning to wash up the dishes thoroughly. Keeping her voice low and quiet due to the subject matter, she replied, "It's just, I thought maybe they wanted some time alone with you ever since you...came back. I didn't want to intrude."

She tried to choose her words cautiously. She didn't want to hit the wrong nerve with him, unknowing how much Will was going through after his return from what was being called the Upside Down by the boys. Nancy still had nightmares about that night in the woods. She could only imagine the kind of nightmares that Will had after being in that dimension for days on end, alone and afraid, the monster lurking around. Hopefully he was able to talk about it with someone—probably Jonathan—and not let it consume him.

It sure consumed Nancy some nights, waking her up in a cold sweat.

She pushed the thoughts away. That wasn't something she wanted to think about.

Will grabbed a dish cloth, coming up next to her, and began to dry the clean bowls and mixer she washed up. "I probably shouldn't be telling you this so don't say anything to anyone," he advised carefully, particular about what he was trying to get across to her, "but he's happier around you. Or whenever your name pops up in conversation. And especially if he knows he gets to come and pick me up from here and there's a chance he might see you."

Nancy, who had been reaching for the timer resting on the

windowsill, had come to a halt, words sinking in. *He's happier around you.* She turned her head, the two sharing a glance after he said that. Will was either making things a lot easier or a lot more difficult. Which one it was, Nancy wasn't sure yet. It seemed like it was a blend of both.

Mike came flying down the staircase before she could respond, the two alerted by his presence by the loud rumbling of his feet against the floor, jumping off the stairs and onto the main floor. He walked into the kitchen and came to a stop. "Dude," he complained, "you can't go around helping her with dishes and other chores. It'll raise her expectations of me."

Nancy glimpsed at Will and then at Mike. It made her heart sink a little bit knowing that Mike had no worries in the world, whereas Will most likely had several duties around his house to help out. She realized then what a privilege it was that both Nancy and Mike had two parents in the household to take care of everything.

Nancy picked up and threw the wet dishcloth at Mike and he cringed as it hit his face, falling to the floor, Will laughing at his friend who wasn't quick enough to divert away from the soaked cloth. "Very funny," he allowed.

"Hilarious," she emphasized. She waved at them both to exit and go back to playing whatever it was they did in that basement for hours on end. "Now get out of here. I'll let you know when dessert is ready."

"Cool."

The two bounced off down the stairs to the basement and Nancy set the timer before she forgot and burned down the house. Her mind was in too many places at once that setting the oven on fire wasn't completely uncalled for.

It was silent again when she was alone in the kitchen, something she would rather avoid. Nancy backed against the counter, put both palms down and lifted herself up. She stared at the tile floor until the timer dinged and brought her out of the thoughts she was having about Will said about Jonathan and her.

He's happier around you.

It was not a coincidence that she was happier around him too.

A couple hours later and Nancy had organized her whole room for the third time that holiday break. She had made her way downstairs as seven o'clock approached, knowing that Will was being picked up at that time. The kitchen had been thoroughly cleaned of any baking that had gone on, cookies and brownies had been munched on, and the remaining ones were stuffed into a Tupperware container.

Will rounded the corner, yelling goodbye to Mike from the top of the stairs of the basement. "See you around, Nancy." He waved and headed for the door.

"Oh, wait. Here." She grabbed and handed over the large plastic container filled with leftover brownies and cookies. "Bring them home with you."

Will looked surprised, glint of joy in his eyes. Nancy couldn't help but smile at him. "Really? Are you sure?"

"Yes. We can't hide the evidence here. My mom wouldn't be pleased if she knew I was feeding Mike sugar without her approval."

He accepted the container gracefully and stuffed it into his backpack that looked like it was so overfilled with textbooks that he would barely be able to manage it on his back. "Thank you, Nancy."

Will had always been such a polite child that it even shocked Nancy. Out of all four boys, he was the shyest, but also the most well-mannered. An admirable trait, Nancy thought.

"You're welcome," she returned.

Nancy went to grab his coat out of the hallway closet. "Is Jonathan picking you up?" she inquired as she handed over the winter jacket.

Outside, a car horn honked twice, indicating to Nancy that it wasn't Jonathan since he would *always* come inside to get Will.

Some inside to see *her*.

“Nope, that would be my mom. She was getting done work at the same time so she told him she would come.”

Nancy nodded her head. “Oh.”

“You’re disappointed,” Will immediately said, eyeing her with curiosity.

Nancy looked down at him. Had it been that obvious? Instead of getting too frazzled, she rubbed the back of her neck. “Could you just tell him I said hello?” she bit at her lip after she said that, the words falling out without her being able to stop them.

Will smiled like he knew something she didn’t. “Sure.”

Nancy waved to Joyce from the car on the street and waited at the door until Will was safely inside. When she shut the door behind her, the frost from the night seeped through her sweater and she shivered. There she was alone again. Nancy eyed the phone in the corner, wondering if she should just call Jonathan herself, but ultimately realized that would look suspicious if she called before Will had the chance to relay her message. It would make her look too desperate, even if she was, in fact, needing some time with him, the only other person who experienced what she did.

Upstairs in her room, she grabbed a pen and paper, writing down her note for the next day.

Call Jonathan.

2. Crush

That night they were all at the dinner table, a rarer of occasions in past years because of the rotating work schedules of Jonathan and his mother. Christmas was over a few days ago, yet the decorations remained out in the house, including the bright tablecloth draped over the table that was picked up at the store his mom worked at for fifty percent off.

It had been an uneventful day, no work, no school, no need to pick up Will from the Wheelers even though he tried to insist to his mother that he could do it. Problem was their house was along her way back from work so oh well for him, Jonathan had to stay put.

Sigh.

He would have liked to have gone—for the obvious reason: Nancy.

He played back that kiss on the cheek after she handed over the neatly wrapped camera a million times over, how her lips felt soft against his skin, touch of lip gloss on them, how his heart stopped for a second and he forgot how to form words when she looked at him, how she smelled so nice that Jonathan wanted to breathe her in all day.

Ugh. How corny. It sounded like he was lovesick or something, pining after a girl he shouldn't want and couldn't have. Even Jonathan knew that was pathetic.

Dinner had been on the table for a few minutes, Will sitting across from Jonathan, but he wasn't eating much, just moving his food around with his fork in no specific pattern taking little bites here and there. They both were, actually, Jonathan still too distracted by the thoughts he shouldn't be having about Nancy.

Their mother noticed the two boys that were uninterested in the food in front of them. "Oh no. Is it overcooked?" she cringed, vein in her neck protruding in worry as she peeked her head over at Will's plate to inspect. "Did I do it again?"

Will popped his head up, blinking as if he had just come out of a dark movie theater and was in the bright sunlight again, brought out of whatever he was concentrating on. “No,” he affirmed, though Jonathan and Will both knew that the meal was indeed slightly overdone. “Sorry. I was just thinking.”

Joyce pushed more green beans onto Will’s plate, claiming he needed more vegetables in his diet, Jonathan catching the upward turn of his younger brother’s nose when she did. He would eat them anyways, just to please her.

“Thinking about what, sweetie?”

Lately, their mom had been making an extra effort to know more about her sons and what was on their minds. It was beginning to get a little intrusive at times, but they went along with it, all things considered. She almost lost one son, and she was trying to make up for lost time from before when she was too busy working to pay the bills.

Will shrugged his shoulders nonchalantly. “Just today. It was fun. Nancy stayed with us,” he smiled, happy. The very mention of her name made Jonathan more interested.

“She did?” their mother asked, surprised.

“Yeah.” Will smiled again, wider that time, his fondness for Nancy showing. Jonathan couldn’t blame him. It was effortless to like her—she was simply one of those people whose presence made everything better. The world looked different when she was around. “It was great. She’s pretty cool, and funny too. I think Mike really likes it when she’s around. So do I.”

Joyce side-eyed Will, big eyes narrowing. “Is this a crush I’m hearing about?”

“What?” Will’s eyebrows pulled together in aversion, turning down the idea. “No way. It’s Mike’s sister.”

Their mother was still entertaining the idea. “Having a crush on an older girl is normal, Will.”

“I don’t have a crush on Nancy!” he squeaked, young voice hitting a high pitch. A devilish smirk appeared after that, Will’s eyes flickering up to Jonathan before they rested back down to his plate. In the smallest of whispers he added, “I know someone who does though.”

Jonathan went still. His eyes glanced over at his mom, who had luckily not heard the comment, and only then did he relax. His feelings for Nancy was not something he wanted to be made public, especially since he didn’t fully understand them himself, nor was he in any position to be sharing them like he had almost did on the couch when she was patching up his hand after they had sliced them open waiting for the monster.

What a disaster that would have been.

At least, that was what he thought.

“Listen, I’m just saying, it would be cool to have an older sister like Mike does,” he clarified, hand gestures and all, trying to get his point across.

Jonathan pretended to take offense to that remark. “What? An older brother not doing it for you?” he teased.

“That’s not what I’m saying,” he argued back, voice hyper like the way their mom’s would get. “Just that Mike’s lucky, you know? She baked these chocolate cookies *and* brownies today just for us. I have the rest in my backpack.”

“Hiding them from us, are you?” joked their mom, reaching over to nudge him on the shoulder.

“Nope. Remind me and I’ll get them when dinner is done. And before you ask, I said thank you for them.”

“Good boy,” she reminded him, ruffling his hair. “But I still think it’s a crush,” Joyce sang from the head of the table.

“It’s not!” Will pointed at Jonathan with his fork, a green bean still speared on the prongs. “In fact, *you* should marry Nancy one day,” Will said abruptly, resting his elbows onto the table. “Then *she* should *would* be my sister. Everyone wins.”

“Sister-in-law,” Joyce corrected the technicality, hint of a smile on her face, trying so hard to hide it. Up to that point, she had avoided mentioning the confusing relationship that Jonathan and Nancy had, but he could tell her mind was swirling with questions and glimpses of a hopeful future she had for her son. “But, you never know what will happen.”

Jonathan wanted to run and hide, heat in his face letting him be aware of the blush creeping up on his cheeks. “Stop it,” he complained, moving the potatoes around his plate with his fork, head down. “She’s a friend.”

Just a friend.

Only a friend.

Nothing more.

Will grabbed his cup of water that was to the left, foot reaching out under the table to barely reach Jonathan’s leg to gently kick it. Before he took a sip, he mumbled out the side of his mouth, “Sure she is.”

Jonathan shot his brother a warning glare—*not in front of mom*—and he quieted down, understanding. His mom, however, kept the conversation going. “She *is* a very nice friend.”

“Mom,” Jonathan grumbled, “can we not talk about it?”

She raised both her hands as she gave up. “Okay, okay, I’ll drop the subject.”

“Thank you.”

He got the feeling it wasn’t entirely over yet, but it would remain off the table for the time being. Jonathan was fine with that. He would just need to think of more creative ways to divert her attention if it was brought up again. It usually didn’t take much to sway her active mind elsewhere.

Later that night when they were all winding down for the evening,

Will sneaked into Jonathan's room, door creaking as it opened. He lingered in the doorway, keeping the door open just enough for his body to fit halfway through. "Hey."

Jonathan pulled the headphones off his head and rested them on the nightstand. "Hey, are you okay?"

Will's shoulders deflated, small shake of the head. "I really wish people would stop asking me that."

Oh.

Right.

Jonathan sometimes forgot that everyone Will encountered asked him how he was doing after the whole being missing for a week debacle that really was so much more than any of them could explain to the rest of the world. No one would actually believe it. Sometimes Jonathan even had a hard time wrapping his mind around it all and he had been front and center to all the action.

"Sorry," he apologized, patting the spot next to him on the bed so his brother would join him, "I won't ask again. As long as you promise that you'll say something if there really is something wrong and you're not okay. Deal?"

"Deal." Will shuffled over to the bed and hopped on, taking the spot next to Jonathan, stretching his legs out, which were so much shorter in comparison to his older brother. "What are you listening to?"

He picked up the headphones again and put them over Will's head, having to hold them up because they were too big to rest without falling off. He nodded along to the tune as the beat increased. "Sounds good." Will plucked them off his head and handed them back. "Nancy said to say hello." He gave him a look that said something like *what the hell, man, why won't you admit how you feel already*. "I could tell she wanted you to be there."

"Oh, really?" laughed Jonathan, doubtful, but also not easily disguising his blissful content over that statement. "And did she tell you that herself?"

Will leaned back on the bed, pillow sinking down underneath his weight, carefully contemplating his next words. He folded his hands into each other and set them on his lap like he was about to say something very important. “No, not verbally, *but* I could tell that she was disappointed you weren’t picking me up and mom was there instead. She wanted to see you.”

“How could you even tell that?”

Honestly, he was just fishing for more information at that point. Information to fuel his unhealthy infatuation with Nancy Wheeler.

Pathetic.

He already knew (but wasn’t willing to give it up even if it was bad for him).

“Aren’t you the one who said that people display their emotions on their faces whether or not they want to? It just kind of sneaks out for a second.”

Damn.

He did say that.

Jonathan scratched his head. “You need to stop being so insightful.”

“What can I say? I’m a natural,” he joked, holding up his hands like he couldn’t do anything about it.

Jonathan started to tickle the sides of Will’s stomach, getting barks of laughter from him. “A natural, huh?”

“Stop!” he laughed again, trying desperately to escape as he flailed around. “Ah! No! Stop!”

“Boys?!?” they heard from down the hall, their mother not happy with the noise that late when the two should be in bed soon.

“Shhh,” hushed Jonathan, releasing Will. “It’s time for you to sleep.”

Without a grumble, Will got up from the bed, straightened out his

pajamas, and headed for the door. Turning the doorknob, Will made one last effort. “Just remember what I said. You should, I don’t know, make a move or something.”

“Make a move?”

“With Nancy,” he clarified, though Jonathan already knew what he was talking about.

Jonathan sighed. It was too complicated for Will to understand. “How about you let me worry about it. Get some sleep.”

Once Will was gone and happily tucked back into his own bed, Jonathan shut off the light and tried to sleep as well, though it would be no use for a few hours. Every night, like usual, his mind fired off scenarios surrounding Nancy, and ones that were far from innocent. Jonathan found out that the teenage boy hormones kicked in whenever Nancy was involved, rushing through his body uncontrolled and unruly.

How unfair.

At least he would be able to sleep later in the morning since school wasn’t back in session for another week. It would help make up for the nights he laid there in the dark fantasizing.

3. Sleep

She opened the door as silent as possible, keeping her footing stealthy, and entered his room without a sound, still a little rattled from seeing the place in the wall that was boarded up from when Joyce said the monster came through. It was still early and Jonathan was asleep. Nancy watched from the far side of the room as he breathed peacefully, lying there on his stomach, shirtless. She stepped closer, eyes running over his exposed back and messy bed hair. She smiled to herself. Nancy liked him like that.

Joyce had already left for work that morning and Will was sleeping over back at her house, which was becoming a regular occurrence, but Jonathan had told her where the spare key to his house was—just in case.

Just in case she needed a place to escape to.

Just in case she needed him.

Of course, he hadn't said that when he told her but it was implied. For that, Nancy was grateful.

She sat down on the edge of the bed carefully. Something inside her forced her curious hand to run over the smoothness of his shoulder blade that was sticking out. The contact with his skin was nice, and Nancy noted that her heart started to beat a little faster in that instance.

He woke up, turning slightly, probably expecting his mom to be there waking him up. He blinked twice, eyes only partway open, and then made the connection that it was actually Nancy there. She noticed he became more self-aware in her presence, the self-consciousness seeping in, a hand reaching behind him to pull the covers halfway up his bare torso.

Nancy wished he would have let it be.

Though, it wasn't something she should be thinking, considering she was with Steve—well, sort of. She had been forcing distance between

them in the past few weeks, dodging his growing affection.

After all, it was Jonathan that Nancy was reaching for in her time of need, not Steve. That said it all right there, even if she was partly unwilling to admit to it.

"Hi," she whispered gently.

She expected a question like *what are you doing here?* to pop up but Jonathan was too observant and too aware of her that he wouldn't say something like that. He noticed her sleep deprived state, the color under her eyes darker than usual, and it prompted him to ask, "Nightmares?"

It wasn't exactly a question.

He already knew the answer.

She nodded, almost embarrassed. Nancy dropped her head and her gaze and played with her hands. "They're worse now. Most of them are about Barb...and that thing...what it did to her. It's the same nightmare every night. I'm afraid to close my eyes. Most nights I end up reading for hours until I finally pass out with the lights still on."

The lights were never off.

Never.

It was weird to be telling him all what was going on with her, really, she never would have expected, that of all people, Jonathan Byers is the one she went running to. But he was always there when she needed him to be. He was most definitely a different guy than most people thought he was. Jonathan was special in that way.

"You need to sleep," he advised, concerned expression playing out as he surveyed the damaged. "You'll go crazy if you don't."

Crazy.

An interesting choice of words.

Nancy already felt like she was halfway to crazy most days, waiting

for that final push over the edge towards full blown insanity.

She pressed her lips together and smoothed out the shiny gloss she was wearing—something she intentionally put on knowing she would be in his presence. Nancy turned her head to look at him, hair falling over her shoulders. She couldn't believe what she was about to ask, but the words fell out without effort or much thought to them. "Can I sleep here?"

Jonathan's eyes widened only a fraction, then immediately scooted over so she had room. He wouldn't have said no, never even imagined telling her no, and that she knew. She hoped it wasn't her taking advantage of him. It couldn't be, could it?

She removed her jacket and her shoes, slipping in under the covers and against the spot he gave her that was warm from his body heat. She rolled onto her side so she was facing him, his eyes scanning over her in a manner that let her know that he was overly worried. He was too caring, too protective of her. Maybe protective wasn't the right word, no, that was a boyfriend's duty. Though the lines between them were blurring so maybe she wasn't being fair about his role.

Her hand reached out again towards him, an almost involuntary response, fingers brushing against some pieces of hair that were sticking out. "Wacky hair you have," she commented.

A blush formed on his cheeks, which he tried to hide. "It can be difficult some mornings."

Nancy gave a small laugh, conjoined with a lingering smile. It seemed that those days she only smiled when Jonathan was around. A real smile, not those fake ones she had been showing off for weeks, making people believe she was fine.

I'm fine, she would say.

No, she wasn't.

Not even close.

Nancy picked up his hand and examined the scar left behind, like the identical one she had on her own hand, and traced her fingertip over

it. They were marked forever, a constant reminder. “The only thing that lets me know it really happened is this.” She traced over the red line again until the tips of Jonathan’s fingers folded over caught her own, preventing her from looking more at the scar.

Jonathan was staring at her at that point, warm eyes focused on her features, waiting for her to look at him. When she finally did, neither of them said anything. They remained like that for maybe a minute, the sound of the leaves rustling around outside the window being the only audible noise. Her eyes briefly traveled to his lips, longing for more contact.

She let out a small sigh, frustrated with herself. Sullenly, she told him, “Maybe I shouldn’t be here.”

“I like it when you’re here,” he immediately responded, then added pleadingly, “Don’t go.”

She thought about it for a moment, if she would actually be able to move her legs and get them out the door—to leave him. The thought shook her in a way that made her arrive on the realization that going was not an option and never was. All she said back was, “Okay.”

She settled against his chest when he sealed his back to the mattress, hand flushing over the skin until it reached his other side, fingers touching his bicep. She somehow managed to drift off to sleep that way, Jonathan stroking her hair.

When her eyes opened again, it took her a few seconds to understand that she had actually fallen asleep without an internal fight, and especially that there had been no nightmares. Maybe she hadn’t been in the sleep cycle long enough to enter that stage of the game, but it was a noteworthy mention. No nightmares. It was possible.

When his chest moved as he breathed in, Nancy picked up her head to look at a fully awake Jonathan. Her voice was groggy when she questioned, “How long have you been awake?”

“An hour.”

“An *hour*?” she emphasized.

Jonathan shrugged his free shoulder. “Maybe two.”

Her mouth popped open. “Why didn’t you wake me up?”

“Like I said, you need the sleep,” he pointed out. “Besides, I don’t mind.”

Nancy rubbed at her eyes and willed herself up into a sitting position, body aching as she stifled a groan. The room was bright, the hour probably well into the afternoon at that point. “I guess I should be getting home,” she sighed, unwillingly. The thought of going back was not a welcomed one.

Jonathan sat up and pulled a black sweater over his head, pulling the arms through. “You don’t have to.”

“Yes I do,” she immediately declined. “I came here unannounced and uninvited. I don’t want to impose on you anymore than I already have. It’s not your job to entertain me.”

Jonathan wasn’t going to have any of that talk. “Nancy,” he said firmly, touching her shoulder. “Just stay. It’s fine, really. I want you here.”

She briefly smiled, then agreed. “Okay.”

His hand remained on her shoulder for longer than it should have until Jonathan peeled it away. It made Nancy wonder why they—mainly her—kept dancing around the growing attraction they had.

Hours later it was dark outside and they were sprawled out on the living room couch, Nancy having convinced Jonathan to let her look through the developed pictures he had taken. They were all so lovely, perfectly framed photos. She thought he had a real talent for it, crafted well over the years. Nancy mentioned about him doing photography work as a career, but Jonathan brushed over it, saying he wasn’t sure what he wanted to do.

She told him again he should do photography and he said he'd consider it.

There were a lot of photos, but one photo caught her eye. It was simple, black and white, an old barn that was falling down in a field, roof caving in, pieces of moss growing up the sides, sensing the emptiness of the abandoned barn. She related to the picture all too well. Nancy kind of felt like that sometimes—like the pieces of who she was were crumbling in and there was no way to stop it.

Jonathan stopped ruffling through prints when he noticed. “What is it?”

“Nothing,” she lied through her teeth, forcing her voice to keep at a normal tone to not easily show the deception. She had become so used to lying that it had become second nature.

“Don’t do that,” he retorted after a pause, “don’t pretend. Not with me.”

Nancy resisted the urge to glare at him. After all, he was only trying to help her. “You really want to know?” She handed over the photo and tapped her finger at the middle. “I feel like that. Broken. Incomplete. Like I’m falling apart and I won’t ever be the same as I was before.”

Before Barb when missing.

Before it turned out she was dead.

Before everyone thought she ran away but Nancy knew the truth of her disappearance and keeping it a secret was lingering over her head like a dark cloud.

Before she was running for her life from that monster in the woods.

Before *everything*.

Nancy could feel the water building in her eyes, her sight glazing over as the tears fought to spill.

“Hey.” Jonathan took her hand and squeezed. “You’re not alone.”

She put her hand over the one he had enclosed her left one in.
“Thank you.”

The front door swung open, startling them both, as Joyce entered, two brown paper bags filled with groceries in them. Nancy quickly turned her face and wiped her eyes with her sleeve.

“Oh,” greeted Joyce, only a tad bit dazed to see her there on the couch. “Hello.”

Bags about to fall, Jonathan rushed over to grab them from Joyce, taking them to the kitchen, watching Nancy as he passed her. She tried to give him a reassuring smile, but it had probably come out twisted looking. He was back in a flash, Joyce’s eyes flickering between the two.

“Nancy came over,” he stated the obvious, motioning to her on the couch.

“Oh, well, that’s nice.” She turned her attention to Nancy, a little winded from the cold walk from the car. “Staying for dinner?”

Nancy looked up at Jonathan, almost for permission, the slight nod of his head enough encouragement for her to answer Joyce with a, “If you don’t mind.”

She waved her hand dismissively. “Of course not. We’d be happy to have you.”

Joyce got to cooking right away, adding the extra portion for Nancy to the meal, chopping up vegetables while Jonathan and Nancy went back to browsing through the developed photos. “You like the new camera?” She had forgotten to ask before.

“Yeah, it’s great.” The way his face lit up made her feel warm inside.
“Thanks again for that. You didn’t have to.”

“I wanted to.”

Nancy had personally picked it out and paid for it. Steve had tried to

take out his wallet in the store, but Nancy had beaten him to the cashier with her saved birthday money. It was something she wanted to do herself.

When there was a knock at the door, they all froze. Funny how all three of them had the immediate sense of fear sink in. How things had changed. That was something that seemed as if it was never going to go away.

Joyce rushed for the front door, wiping her hands along the sides of her shirt before grabbing the doorknob. They all must have gave a sigh of relief to see that the chief was there standing on the brightly lit porch.

“Hopper?”

Hopper ducked in the front door, taking off his hat, pushing it against his chest humbly. “I just wanted to stop by and make sure everything was good here.”

Joyce was overwhelmed, in a good way, by his presence and his words. “You don’t have to keep checking up on us. We’re fine. Don’t waste your time coming all the way over here.”

He tilted his head to the side, eyebrow raised. “It would never be a waste of time, Joyce. It helps me sleep at night knowing you’re okay.”

Jonathan might not have noticed the way Joyce kept her big smile and Hopper kept his eyes trained on Joyce with a little something extra flickering in them, but Nancy noticed all too well. Her foot extended outward and made contact with Jonathan. He looked up, and she nodded over in the direction of the two adults. “Look,” she whispered. “Love is in the air.”

Jonathan shot her a confused look, turned his head towards the doorway, then back to her, shaking his head. “That’s insane.”

After he said that, though, his eyes moved back to what was transpiring between Joyce and Hopper. Nancy thought it was nice, that the two would be good for each other. Hopper’s smooth and

calm state would balance out Joyce's usual quirky and multitasking one.

"All right, I'll be headed out then. I've got to stop by the station on last time." Hopper put his hat back on before trekking off the porch and into the snow. "I'll see you around, Joyce."

"Bye, Jim."

Nancy watched more closely as Joyce closed the door slowly, looking out at Hopper as he got in his car. When she turned around and saw both teenagers looking at her, she changed her expression to an almost embarrassed one. "Well, dinner won't cook itself." She headed for the kitchen without another word.

"Nothing is going on between them," Jonathan told her after Joyce went back into the kitchen and was out of earshot. "Trust me on that."

She leaned in to whisper, "What? You don't want Hopper to be your new daddy?"

Jonathan's eyes widen and so did his smile. "Don't ever say that again," he laughed.

"I can totally see it! The two of them together, hand in hand. Mrs. Joyce Hopper. I expect my wedding invitation to be delivered soon."

Jonathan cupped his hands over his face. Just then there was a bit of a commotion that came from the kitchen and both of them browsed the area to see what was going on. "Everything okay in there?" called Jonathan, not able to see what occurred.

Joyce reappeared in the living room. "I need to run to the store," she claimed, searching for her keys.

"This late?" Jonathan looked over the couch at the clock. "It's almost eight."

"I don't have any garlic or potatoes! I forgot it." She made a face, frazzled and frustrated with herself. She grabbed her coat and frantically threw her arms into the sleeves. She pointed at Jonathan

as she opened the door. “I’ll be home in twenty minutes. Stay put.”

The door slammed behind her and Jonathan muttered, “Where would I even go to?”

The headlights to the car blared through the front windows until Joyce had backed out and driven off down the road. Nancy felt like she should have said something about watching out for ice on the roads, but Joyce had more experience driving so she figured she would be careful enough, even if her mind was in a million other places at once.

“So,” Nancy began precariously, setting down a photo onto her lap. “How much do you want to be that your mom and Hopper are meeting up at a motel somewhere?” Nancy teased again, nudging him with her foot once more.

Jonathan plugged his ears and hummed to drown out her words. “I’m going to have to kick you out if you say that again.”

“No you won’t.”

“You’re right, I won’t.”

An awkward silence followed where the pair looked at each other until Nancy grabbed her arm and pulled herself in closer—a nervous habit. She tucked some hair behind her ear and changed the conversation. “So, uh, my parents are having this New Year’s Eve party. You should come.”

Jonathan smiled, flattered, but was hesitant. “I don’t know...”

“Please,” she insisted further, speaking fast, but also maintaining that hard to resist teenage girl allure. “It’s kind of boring and Mike and I usually end up sneaking away with a bunch of food, but it might be more tolerable with you there. You could even bring your mom and Will, too. My parents won’t mind. The more the merrier, right?”

He nodded when she finished. “Okay, I’ll see. I’d love to though.”

“Good.”

4. New Year's Eve

When the phone rang for the third time, Nancy had enough of the shrill noise interrupting her. She was trying to figure out what dress to wear to the party—something she would have enlisted Barb to help her with, which only further agitated her when the phone rang, depressed state firing up into irritation. The phone by her bed was picked up, nearly yanked out of the wall, to be set on her lap as she held the phone part up to her ear. “Hello?” she asked angrily, teeth gritted.

If it was another prank call from some loser bugging Mike, she was sure as hell going to give them an earful.

“Nancy! It’s Steve.” It sounded like he was smiling, happy as could be, which didn’t make things any better. His trip to the mountains for New Years must have been going well. “How’s it going?”

Nancy was at a loss for words. How was it going? Well, that was a good question.

“Not the greatest,” she rattled off, staring down at her fingernails, “my best friend is dead and I’m going crazy sitting around the house waiting for school to start again. I actually miss studying.”

She waited for his response, though she assumed nothing he would say would have pleased her.

“Oh.” His voice was darker, deflated by her more than honest reply to his cheery question. But really, what did he expect? “I’m sorry to hear that.”

Sorry to hear that.

She nearly laughed.

“It’s been better the past few days,” she allowed, twirling the cord of the phone around her finger, waiting until the conversation could be over. “I’ve been hanging out with Jonathan and that makes it better.”

There was a noise on the other end and she heard Steve tell someone

to shut up in the background. “Wait. Did you say Jonathan?”

“I did.”

“Oh.”

Nancy was reduced to shaking her head, eyes slanted shut. Even after all that had happened, Steve was still sour towards Jonathan. It was actually rather annoying and childish of him, trying to use the photographs taken of her as an excuse to continue to pretend that Jonathan was a sketchy guy.

He wasn’t.

End of story.

Both Jonathan and Steve had made mistakes, there was no questioning that. Yet somehow Steve was under the impression that he was the better guy of the two.

Starring Nancy *the slut* Wheeler.

Yeah, what he did and went along with was much worse in her book. By a long shot. At least Jonathan had never humiliated her in front of the whole town.

There was more of a commotion in the background and Nancy picked up on voices of Tommy and probably Carol, who had planned on visiting him at the cabin rented by Steve’s parents. It was kind the last straw and Nancy broke, words flooding out of her. “Steve, I don’t think we should see each other anymore,” she said abruptly before she lost the nerve to. “When you get back, we should just be friends.”

There was silence on the other end of the receiver, and she could only imagine what was going through his mind. She didn’t have to wait for long to hear it though, Steve always having been the one to say whatever was going on in his head. The jealousy poured in, sharp edges around his voice. “Is this about Jonathan?”

Nancy rolled her eyes. It was never Steve’s fault, always someone else’s. “No, Steve, this is about you and me and the fact that I just don’t think you’re good for me anymore.”

“And, what? *He* is??!” he was half yelling at her, frustrated.

Nancy didn’t feel bad anymore, not with how poorly he was reacting. “I’ve got to go. Have a good New Years. I’ll see you in school next week,” she replied calmly. “Just remember *we’re over*. Goodbye.”

She clicked the phone back into its spot and drew in a breath, feeling for the first time that some weight was off of her shoulders.

Her mother was running around the house frantically, setting out bowls of candy and fancy food. It was always best to ignore her in that state and stay out of the way before she accidentally dropped a cherry pie on someone’s head.

It happened once three years ago—Mike the unlucky victim.

Nancy came down the stairs as eight o’clock rolled around and guests would be arriving. Down on the landing, she met Mike, the heels she was wearing making her seem a lot taller than him once standing by his side. Mike was dressed in a boy’s suit, looking rather uncomfortable as he kept moving his arms up and down, fidgeting. “This is awful. I can’t move around.” He tried to dance, but failed miserably at it.

Nancy cringed, watching him. “Stop that,” she instructed, grabbing his shoulders to put him back in his place in front of her. “Embarrass mom and you won’t hear the end of it.”

“I guess you’re right.”

“I’m usually right,” she retorted.

Mike turned his head and looked up at her. “*Almost* being the key word.”

Nancy crossed her arms over her chest. “I’m not afraid to kick you with these heels, just so you’re aware.”

He piped down and turned his back as their mother appeared in her long navy blue evening gown. It made Nancy relieved that she had

chosen to go with a simple green knee length one, though she was sure she would get those same *you're the image of your mother* comments again.

Yuck.

Nancy in no way wanted to be like her mother.

"Nancy," she scolded, brows showing off her disappointment, "I told you to wear your hair all the way up."

Something along the lines of *you don't get to control my life* spun through Nancy's mind and almost popped out of her mouth before she caught herself. She glanced at the hair twisted into a bun that the top of her mother's head, a poinsettia hair piece nuzzled into the side. The frown on Nancy's face deepened. Her mother tried too hard to mold Nancy into a mini version of herself. Holly would probably suffer the same treatment, unfortunately.

"Sorry," she quickly brushed it off, smoothing out her hair that was in a half up hairdo, curls spilling over her shoulders. "Forgot."

The doorbell rang and any other comments were dropped as Nancy pulled Mike out of the way as their mother rushed for the door, not before yelling for their father to make himself useful and make an appearance.

For the most part, Mike and Nancy split up to make the dreaded small talk with all their relatives and friends of their parents. Nancy was good at carrying a conversation so it wasn't all that difficult for her, just boring since no one ever had anything interesting to talk about. Nancy would usually have to try hard to muffle the groan when asked if there was any *important* men in her life, as if that was the only thing that mattered to the older women at the party—especially her aunt.

She kept closer to the door to keep an eye on who was walking through. She had designated herself as the one to get the coats, a task usually allocated to Mike, but she wanted to know when Jonathan

was getting there. Apparently Will had come down with a cold so Joyce was staying home with him, giving Jonathan a free leash to visit Nancy.

When he finally stepped through the door, Nancy rushed over, the overwhelming feeling of comfort rushing into her.

“Hi,” he greeted, eyes scanning the room before they fell on her, glancing up and down. “You look, uh...wonderful.”

He grimaced after he said it, like it had been something he had wanted to keep to himself.

“Thanks,” she replied, looking down, unable to keep eye contact as a blush formed. Luckily the dim lighting would hide it. “Come on in.”

She grabbed his coat and put it into the closet. A second glimpse at Jonathan proved how out of place he felt in the room full of loud people, who were complete strangers to him. It reminded her of how he once said he didn’t like most people when they were having that argument in the woods. Nancy bumped his shoulder with her own and smiled, offering some reassurance.

Her Aunt Dot in the far corner noticed the interaction, straining her neck over to get a look at the two, pulling her glasses down to squint their way. “Oh, no,” Nancy muttered, seeing her starting to walk over out of the corner of her eye. Nancy firmly grabbed Jonathan’s arm and started in the other direction. “Follow me if you don’t want to get trapped into an hour long conversation with a semi drunk lady asking too many personal questions.” Without a word, Jonathan kept up with Nancy’s stride into the other room.

Three hours in and her father was the lucky one who had escaped into the living room and was asleep in the chair he slept in most nights. What was particularly impressive was that he was in such a deep sleep that his mouth was wide open, snoring loudly, rounded glasses hanging crooked from his face being titled to the side. It made Nancy wonder if he had grown so exhausted from the boring people and her mother’s constant chattering or if maybe he just drank too

much.

Most likely it was both.

Nancy and Jonathan had made their way into the room after a long conversation with one of the neighbors who was a little too curious about Will's disappearance. The Christmas tree was still in the corner all lit up, the clear glass decorations sparkling with the lights. The only eye sore in the room was the passed out man leaning back in his usual spot. She shook her head as she gazed at her dad. "I swear, it's like he lives in that chair and is married to the TV."

"Hey, at least he's around. You'll always know where to find him," Jonathan joked, getting at kick of it. "That counts for something"

She thought about it, then declined. "Not really."

Before she could explain further, Mike entered the room, unwrapped a candy from a crystal bowl, and crunched his teeth down onto it. He examined the situation at hand. "Do you dare me to stuff a cupcake in his mouth?"

Clearly, someone was not impressed with the current New Year's festivities going on in their house. Without his friends, Mike tended to get antsy, and antsy meant mischievous.

"A cupcake?" Nancy giggled, then quickly covered up her lips with her hand. "Mike!" she lightly scolded, then motioned to their snoring father. "While he sleeps?"

"It would be funny. Imagine mom's reaction when she finds him."

Nancy and Mike exchanged a grin, and then she agreed. "Okay."

"Be right back." And off he went to the kitchen for the platter of cupcakes, a new mission to keep him occupied from being bored.

Nancy turned back to Jonathan. "This is a bad idea." She didn't really mean it, she actually thought it would be hilarious. "Right?"

"Well, a twelve year old boy did think of it so...not much of an argument there. They're full of bad ideas."

She inched closer, hand catching onto the collar of his dress shirt to straighten it out. The last time he had been all dressed up was for Will's fake funeral, but present day Nancy allowed herself to admire how sharp he looked in the crisp white shirt that was tucked in. "What were you like when you were twelve?"

His smile faded, eyes dropping to the ground. "My dad was still *around*, so..." He trailed off, not able to finish. Nancy didn't press him for more information. She had a feeling she already understood what life must have been like with Lonnie Byers looming over all of them. Still, she would ask him about it one day and hopefully he would let her in on his childhood.

Mike came back before she could think about it anymore and Nancy dropped her hand back to her side, letting go of Jonathan's collar, but not before Mike had seen. His eyebrows lifted questionably before holding out the red dyed frosting covered cupcake, proud of himself, and not about to make any comment about how close Nancy was standing to Jonathan.

"Anyone notice you?" She noted the devious smile on Mike's face.
"You look suspicious."

Mike nodded back to the room had come from. "I think they're all drunk at this point. Uncle Bill thought I was a table and tried to use my head to put his wine glass down on." He made a face like he didn't understand the appeal of alcohol. "They wouldn't have noticed if I had done cartwheels down the hall with no clothes on."

Peeling the wrapper away, Mike moved so that he was positioned behind the chair, in case he needed to duck and cover to hide, and slowly craned his neck while his hand with the dessert neared their father's mouth.

"This is so wrong," Nancy whispered past a smile.

Mike wedged the cupcake into their father's mouth enough that it would stay put, giving it one last tap to ensure its safety.

For a second there, the snoring stopped, Mike coming to a freeze as they waited to see what would happen next. When an even louder

snore echoed past the cupcake, Jonathan couldn't keep the laughter in any longer and neither could Nancy. They all bolted from the room, Mike going in a separate direction than Jonathan and her. She grabbed his hand and maneuvered them through the crowd of people dressed in hideous sweaters and uncomfortable heels, without saying a polite *excuse us* even once.

Screw politeness.

She felt too light and airy from the genuine laughter to care about making a good impression with her mother's friends. She grabbed her coat from the closet, throwing on her snow boots. Nancy tossed Jonathan his jacket, and off they went outside, strolling down the silent, empty streets.

Jonathan grabbed his camera from his car, wanting some photos of the falling snow. Nancy watched as he so expertly held it in his hands, focusing the lens. She wished she was as good at something as Jonathan was at taking pictures. All she knew how to do well was study and get good grades, and that didn't seem like it amounted to much to her anymore.

When he was done, Nancy strode up in front of him. "Take my picture." He looked surprised when she said it. She began to back away, slow steps in the snow, then bolted the other direction, yelling after him, "Only if you can catch me!"

He started after her, Nancy glancing behind her to see how close he was. She was laughing again, it becoming an addiction, so easy to let it slip past her lips.

She felt happy.

Actually happy.

When a snowball glided into her back leg, her stockings absorbed the blow. She wrinkled up her nose. "Hey!"

Her hand formed her own snowball, holding it back in a threatening way towards Jonathan. He was smiling wide, teeth gleaming. When

she threw it, Jonathan ducked and it glazed the arm of his jacket. Not satisfied, Nancy grabbed a handful of fluffy snow and darted for him, patting the snow onto the top of his head.

Jonathan shook off the snow, shaggy hair flying in all direction, some flakes of snow dusting her face as he did. She looped her arms around his waist, too caught up in the moment to think anything of it and what it might imply. Jonathan twirled her around, Nancy looking up to the dark sky, seeing the stars shining bright.

She never wanted to let go of that feeling.

Beginning to get dizzy, she lost her footing, and Nancy fell backwards into the snow of a stranger's front lawn, taking Jonathan down with her. They both tried to catch themselves before hitting the ground, but it was no use, the snow had won. Jonathan crashed on top of her, the two of them laying there in a daze. It reminded Nancy of how Jonathan had pulled her out of the tree and onto him, only that time it was Nancy who was holding onto Jonathan on top of her.

"Ouch," she murmured, hand touching her head from the jolt, light laugh escaping.

Jonathan propped himself up on his forearms, stuck in between her legs. Even though it was so cold out that her eyes were at risk of turning into icicles, she could feel the body heat radiating off of him despite their layers of clothes.

Nancy moved some hair out of his eyes, Jonathan just blinking as she did, hand coming to a still on his rosy cheek. His breath had picked up significantly, given his position. There was no hiding it, the reaction of the winter air hitting the hot breath creating the steam-like effect in front of them. Nancy wondered how many times he had imagined himself on top of her, or even vice versa. She had certainly thought about it more than once in the past few weeks.

"What are you waiting for?" she asked, hinting at the obvious. Her other hand grabbed his jacket and pulled him in, taking the plunge, and kissing him on the mouth, lips cold and somewhat chapped.

Still nice.

Still worth it.

Nancy gripped his jacket from the sides when his freezing fingers touched the side of her face. She broke the kiss, his lips falling to her neck. “Take my picture,” she urged again, “just like this.”

Jonathan took a moment to process what she said, then got up to his knees, grabbed the camera, and snapped a photo of her as she laid there in the snow. He pulled away from it and stared at her, lips parted, his affection for her playing out on his features.

“Any good?” asked Nancy.

“Beautiful,” he answered, breathless.

It stirred something inside of her. Despite all her flaws, all her mistakes, and present demons plaguing her dreams and invading her day to day routine, Jonathan had looked through the lens and rendered the result as *beautiful*. That meant something. That meant everything.

Inside the house next to them, she heard the countdown to midnight begin.

5.

4.

3.

2.

She grabbed ahold of Jonathan’s jacket and pulled him back onto her, kissing him once more.

5. Priceless

He couldn't stop smiling—it was permanent. The whole ride home all Jonathan could think about was Nancy. He pulled his bottom lip in and ran his teeth over it several times on the ride back home, remembering the sensation of being pressed against Nancy in the snow, lips on her, barely feeling the frigid air around them.

Before he knew it, Jonathan had pulled into his driveway, mind so far away that he didn't realize he had made good time due to the empty roads.

He grabbed the camera from the backseat and trudged through the newly fallen snow on the previously shoveled driveway. On the porch, the light outside was shining bright for him. Jonathan turned the key and opened the door quietly, it being well past midnight and everyone would be asleep, only the dim living room light on.

Except everyone wasn't asleep.

Jonathan made it two steps into the house before he came to a halt, hand still lingering on the door that was half way open, some snowflakes blowing onto the carpet.

Hopper was in his living room.

Sitting on the couch.

With his mom.

Talk about unexpected.

They all exchanged glances, everyone waiting for someone else to say something. The tension that swarmed into the room all of a sudden was too noticeable. His mom finally awkwardly got up off the couch with a half smile, tossing a blanket aside. "Honey, you're home." With a kiss to the cheek, Joyce's eyes revealed a little too much. She was frazzled, surprised by his presence, and that had to do entirely with Hopper.

Jonathan wasn't sure what to say so he went with a neutral question.

“Is Will awake too?”

“No,” she answered, waving down the hall. “He’s been out like a light for hours.”

Jonathan’s eyes wandered over to where Hopper was now standing. “Is that how long he has been here?” he asked with an edge of accusation.

Joyce never had the chance to speak since Hopper gathered his things and was headed for them to get to the door, which was still open. “I’ll be headed out.” His strong hand fell onto Jonathan’s shoulder. “Good to see you, Jonathan.”

Jonathan narrowed his eyes, always suspicious. “Sure.”

“Goodnight, Joyce.”

His mom stood in her spot as Hopper said goodbye and shut the door, closing off the cold draft that was leaking into the house. Jonathan looked over at her once he was gone and it looked like she didn’t quite know what to say or do. He decided to make things easy and not make a big deal about it, heading down the hallway towards his room.

“Honey?”

He stopped and turned around, hand on the doorknob of his room. “Yeah?”

“Did you have a good night at the Wheelers?”

His heart raced a bit, Nancy moving back to the forefront of his mind. “Yes,” he answered, voice a little higher than it should have been. He cleared his throat and nodded to his door. “Long night though, I’m going to get ready to sleep. Goodnight.”

Once he was in a safety of his own four walls, Jonathan relaxed as he collapsed onto the bed. The urge to call the Wheeler house was strong, just so he could hear her voice on the telephone. He suppressed it, knowing that he had been the last to leave and the Wheeler household was most likely passed out in their beds.

Jonathan, on the other hand, was wide awake.

Nancy.

Nancy.

Nancy.

His mind was obviously swirling with thoughts about her.

It got him really thinking though. If being around Nancy made him so happy, then why would he try and deprive his mom of that same feeling, if that was what it was for her with Hopper. Perhaps he was being unfair, and selfishness was never a trait that Jonathan identified with, so he might as well not give anyone a hard time about whatever was going on with his mom and the chief.

It still weirded him out, but he'd have to work on that.

Jonathan rubbed his eyes and got back up with a groan, headed for his door. He opened it partway and stuck his head out. "Hey, mom?" he called down the hall, knowing she was in hearing distance.

Her head poked out of her room, eyebrows raised. "Yes?"

"If Hopper makes you happy then you should see him more often." He hadn't worded it properly, but that was what he was going with. "Goodnight."

ONE WEEK LATER

He stared at the freshly developed photo. It was of Nancy with snowflakes in her hair, flat against the snow of a random yard, eyes sparkling.

It was his favorite picture, hands down.

Nothing would ever be able to compare.

His fingers absently traced his lips, remembering how it felt to kiss Nancy. It was way better than he had ever imagined (and he had sure imagined it a lot, too much, even).

He was so entranced by the picture that when the door to the darkroom opened, he didn't bother looking back to see who it was, and he had barely heard the squeak of the door. It wasn't until her voice said, "Jonathan?" that he glanced over his shoulder, frozen in place. Nancy stood there before entering and closing the door, shutting off the outside light once again.

His stomach knotted up the way it had so many times before that he couldn't imagine a time where he wasn't nervous when she appeared.

The red hue altered the color of her originally white blouse. She dropped her binders onto the table and wedged herself in between Jonathan and the counter, looping her arms around him and locked her hands at the small of his back, pulling him in close. "Do you want to do something after school?"

It took a moment for him to register that it was all actually happening. Jonathan smiled at her, setting the photo down in a safe spot. "Do you really think that in any universe I would say no that that?"

Nancy bit her bottom lip, pink gloss shining against the light. "I guess not. But I figured that I would give you the choice anyways, just so I could hear you say yes."

She got up on her toes, waiting. "Yes," he answered, then closed the gap.

Her lips were warm, and despite the stickiness from the gloss, and all Jonathan wanted to do was stay in the darkroom all day, skip the rest of his classes, and soak in the feeling of how he felt around Nancy. Too bad life wasn't that easy.

Though everything in him told him not to, Jonathan pulled away. "What would you want to do?"

Her eyes widened a bit and she drew in a breath before she spoke again. "I want to face my fears."

Jonathan wasn't following. "What do you mean?"

"In the woods," she clarified, seemingly a little bit hesitant. "I want

to go back to the place we were when we saw that thing out there. I think it's the only way I can get better. I need to face my fears.”

Jonathan instantly felt the need to protect her. “That might not be such a good idea...”

“Well, it’s all I got. And besides, I’ll go with or without you, I would just rather you be there with me. Your choice.”

Jonathan blew some air out the side of his mouth. “Talk about being stuck between a rock and a hard place,” he muttered, half smiling.

Nancy’s independence was something that he greatly admired. It seemed that despite all that had happened to them with the monster, the disappearances, and the other horrors, Nancy was still able to show her true colors and explore her autonomy.

“You know I’ll come,” he finally answered, his fingers rubbing against the silkiness of her blouse. “But on the condition that we get out of there before it gets dark.”

“Deal.”

Satisfied with the new plans, Nancy’s eyes travelled over to where he had set down the photo of her. “That was what you were looking at when I came in?”

He suddenly felt embarrassed, like he had been caught doing something wrong, which he hadn’t been. Jonathan remembered the last time they were in the darkroom together and she had asked him about why he took her picture without a top on through the window of Steve’s bedroom. What a bad decision that had been. At least that time around he had photographed her at her own request.

“Yes.”

Nancy released her grip and turned around, holding the photo up into the glow of the light. “Do you like it?”

He gave her a look like she had asked a ridiculous question. “Of course.” He gently took it from her and glanced at it. “The memory behind it is priceless.”

Nancy bumped his shoulder, eyelashes fluttering. Flirtatiously, she added, “Oh, really?”

“Most definitely.”

She pressed her lips together and headed for the door. “Good.”

6. The Backseat

He was watching her carefully, too carefully maybe. It wasn't that out there in the woods there was an intimidating feeling lurking, but knowing what had happened there made it feel...different. They were out of place.

Nancy hadn't been talking much ever since they exited the car and began trudging through the layers of snow, some old, some new. She was searching for the tree, he thought, the one he pulled her out of. In reality, all the trees looked too similar to him, but Nancy was determined so he went along with it, even if it meant frozen toes and ears.

He stayed silent, two paces behind Nancy at all times. It was easier if she was the one directing their movements.

It was one of those days towards the end of January with a cloudy winter overcast and still air. The trees had a thin layer of ice lining some of the branches due to an overnight frost a few days back, the temperature still cold enough that the ice and snow had not melted yet. Still, they kept on moving, snow boots being put to good use.

Fifteen minutes in and Nancy started to slow down. "Maybe this was a bad idea," she finally proclaimed in a huff, coming to a full halt. She pulled her pure white hat down over her ears more and pushed a few strands of dark hair out of her face.

Jonathan kicked at a layer of frozen snow, small pieces shattering and sliding across the untouched land. He stuck his hands into his jacket pockets. "Not a bad idea," he murmured. "Might be a little impossible though."

He felt entirely guilty to have to say it but it needed to be said. To his surprise, she started giggling, which then progressed into having her head thrown back in an uncontrolled fit of laughter. Jonathan smiled hesitantly, somewhat afraid she was having a breakdown as he watched it all play out. He took one step closer. "Nancy?"

She threw her arms around her torso. “Ouch. It hurts to laugh this much.” She pulled herself together and walked over to him, the snow trying to pull her down with every step. “Feels nice.”

She was happy.

And that made Jonathan happy.

He laughed along with her.

Both driver and passenger side doors slammed shut to cut off the chill that had been attacking them as they made their way back to the car. “I’m freezing!” Nancy hissed, pulling off her snow covered boots to inspect that damage. “I think snow melted into these useless things. I knew I should have bought new ones.”

The boots clunked down onto the ground and Nancy removed her jacket as Jonathan turned the ignition key. Since the engine needed to warm up before they drove off, Jonathan grabbed a blanket from the backseat (which his mom always insisted on having in the car in case it broke down somewhere) and placed it on her lap. “Here.”

“Thanks,” she grinned, bundling it up and over her shoulder, the corners meeting at where she held them together at her midsection.

A light snowfall had started again, the gray skies having become darker and more ominous. Thick snowflakes began to pillow onto the windshield, staying for only a moment until they melted into a droplet from the warming car.

“Hey, Jonathan?”

“Yes?”

“You’re so thoughtful,” she said, pulling the blanket closer, looking as if she were impressed.

Jonathan bashfully ducked his head and shrugged one shoulder.

Nancy's fingers grazed across the outer region of his face, making his eyes find hers again, eyes that were glassed over from the cold. Her hand fell flat onto his jacket and stayed there for a good five seconds until she spoke up again, that time there being an edge to her usually soft spoken voice.

"Come here."

Before anything in his mind could process, she had swiftly fit herself overtop of the front seat and into the back. She grabbed him by the coat collar and was yanking him backwards as well with more force than he would have expected. Jonathan's limbs fumbled around until he was all the way in the back, Nancy pulling him on top of her as she stretched out the length of her body against the seats.

Her legs had latched on at the sides of his hips, one leg hooked around his leg to keep him in place, not that Jonathan minded at all.

He got the sense of where things were headed when Nancy grabbed his hand and shoved it under her long sleeved red shirt to cup her breast over the bra. Somehow at that moment he had run completely out of breath and was forced to sharply inhale. His thumb was pressed onto the pillow-like flesh, making him only what more. Hesitantly, with the hem of her shirt grabbed onto with his free hand, Jonathan pulled it up and over. He yanked his sweater off as well, tossing it somewhere to the side.

Nancy shifted downward against him, causing him to clench his teeth from the motion, her skirt bunching up around the top of her thighs. Her hands rested around his waist until they sunk further down to his waistband, her chilled thumbs slightly pressing under the material. That contact alone was enough for an involuntary moan to be released, much to Jonathan's embarrassment.

"Take this off," Nancy demanded gently, tilting her neck up to be able to whisper into his ear, then placed a few tender kisses on his jawline.

As Jonathan was clumsily pulling the zipper and yanking down his pants with one hand, there was this uncomfortable banging of their hip bones against each other until Jonathan shifted his weight

around.

Even though it was frigid outside and the car heater hadn't reached the backseat yet, Jonathan felt nothing but warmth all over. His palms were sweaty from nervousness, hands gliding over various body parts of Nancy, wherever he could get them. And when Nancy arched up her back and unclasped the bra, she let it fall to the floor.

It was all happening so quickly.

At first he thought he had things semi under control but then there was a half-naked Nancy underneath him and *holy shit* did he take a teenage boy moment to realize that *wow* that was what breasts looked like and felt like in real life. And though he doubted every move he made, placing his mouth on the newly exposed skin seemed like it might be a good idea. Only when Nancy sighed contently did he realize it was the right decision, slow tongue movements against the skin.

She reached for her bag when he pulled away, fingers searching through it as he took advantage of her head being tilted to the side and lowered his mouth to her neck, sucking on the skin. The intent was to make a noticeable red mark there, one she would need to hide the following day.

"Here."

His hand grabbed whatever it was that she was shoving at him. Jonathan propped himself up on his elbows when he felt the circular outline through the small package. He looked at the condom with wonder, then to Nancy. "You're sure?"

It sounded stupid to ask, but he was in disbelief still.

"Yes," she said firmly.

Nancy slipped her hands down his sides and to the material of his blue and white striped boxers, tugging them down as much as she could manage but he needed to take over and slip them the rest of the way off. There was a new level of self-consciousness that rose, having never been naked in front of anyone, especially a girl.

Especially Nancy.

He settled his body against her once more, Nancy shifting him into position. He pushed her skirt up even more, moving his hand in between them, knuckles grazing her warm skin until he grabbed his dick and got the condom on after fumbling with it at first. Nancy situated her hips just right and he felt the wetness immediately, grunting against her neck as he pushed inside of her all the way.

He started moving against her, Nancy's fingers pulling almost too hard at the roots of his hair as he rocked. That didn't matter though, not at all. Sure, it was all new to him and Jonathan wasn't entirely sure if he was doing it right, but hell, did it feel good.

So.

Damn.

Good.

And definitely way better than he could have ever imagined.

He knew when it was about to happen, knew way from the beginning it was going to be a short lived experience of him losing his virginity. There was only so much he could hold back until he burst into a million pieces. Some kind of unfamiliar sound came out of his mouth before he forced his parted lips against Nancy's neck, body shifting to a still, limbs unable to move as euphoria took over.

His eyes drifted closed for a minute as Jonathan regained his breath. "Umm..." he stumbled for the right words.

She smiled brightly, leaning her head to the side. "You can take me home now."

He nodded. "Right, okay."

On the way to the Wheeler's house Nancy had her arm looped around Jonathan's as he drove. It was one of those moments when he thought that life could not possibly get any better. Even as he

dropped her off and she kissed him goodnight, the daze continued on his journey home and even once he was in the house getting settled in for the evening.

“Why are you acting weird?”

Jonathan glanced over his shoulder at his brother standing in the doorway of Jonathan’s bedroom, arms folded over his chest. His eyes went wide momentarily, feeling like he had been caught, only to defensively respond with, “I’m not.”

“You keep smiling,” Will continued, analyzing. “That’s out of character for you.” He stepped in, eyes narrowing before he wiggled his eyebrows. “Is it because of *Nancy*?”

“Get to bed,” Jonathan commented, not revealing anything, adding short laugh at the end.

Will grinned happily. “See you in the morning,” he chanted.

7. Spring

Spring meant that the bone chilling air was officially swept out of Hawkins with no one trying to get it to stick around any longer. The cold had officially been replaced with trees growing their buds and flowers beginning to sprout out of the ground where a fresh and green blanket of grass filled in the empty spaces of front lawns where piles of snow used to park in a stationary spot.

It also meant that Hopper was around a lot more.

Jonathan found that he didn't mind as much as he did in the beginning. Besides, between work, school, and Nancy, his time at the house was limited and he rarely saw the guy. The only way he knew that he had been around was the rather chipper mood his mother was in or a left over empty bottle of beer in the kitchen or living room. Or the bottle in his mother's bedroom....which Jonathon absolutely was not going to contemplate that scenario.

Still, there were a few passing thoughts about Hopper one day being his stepdad. It wasn't the worst thought in the world. He made his mom happy and he was good with Will. And it would be good for Will to have a decent father figure in his life, especially as he went into his early teenage years.

The school bell had rung and Jonathan was waiting for Nancy outside, leaned up against his car, watching as people filtered out of the building that trapped them for hours. It wasn't long at all until he spotted her. It was rare that Nancy was in a dress, but she was embracing the weather that day, with the beaming sun and warm air. The light breeze picked up at the edges of the dress as she walked towards Jonathan with her books in her hands.

Her small smile and continuous eye contact nearly made him allow the gusts of wind to blow him over. Nancy Wheeler, his *girlfriend*, was coming right at him and ready to spend the rest of the afternoon together.

He still couldn't quite get his head around that.

Nancy Wheeler.

Girlfriend.

Two words that were synonyms to him. And if there was any such thing as luck in the world, Jonathon must have been hit with it pretty damn good. Life seemed to have found a unique balance.

As they drove out of Hawkins, the *Come Again Soon* sign passed them without a care. The pair made regular trips to neighboring towns just to get away, making it an afternoon of travel.

Later that day, they found themselves about thirty five miles out. They were laying in the grass in a large park, Jonathan with his hand shoved up her dress, fingers gripping around her thigh. They were the only ones there, so naturally Jonathan was allowed to be a bit improper out in public.

“Admit it, you wore this just to torment me,” he theorized out loud, tugging at the hem of the soft dress.

She bit at her bottom lip, only making him want her more than he already obviously did. “Maybe.”

“Maybe,” he repeated, then kissed her more.

Nearby, there was an ovular pond with a variety of ducks swimming around. Geese who had returned North after migrating were already waddling next to the little ones that had hatched not too long ago.

“Let’s go feed the ducks,” Nancy proposed, her head drifting so she could get a better look. “Come on.”

Jonathan was reluctant to move. “They can wait.”

“So can you,” she retorted, moving her dress back down her legs.

Jonathan smiled at her. “I’m completely, unfathomably in love with you, Nancy. I don’t think there are even words in the English language to explain how I feel.”

Clearly, the whole expressing himself came a lot easier than it had

been nine months ago.

"Perhaps you should pick up another language then," she suggested with some wit. "The romance language of Italian might help you out with finding the right words."

He rested his forehead onto hers and laughed a laugh that came without any effort. Everything was easy with Nancy. "I'll keep that in mind, but it may be a few years before I would be fluent. I'm just warning you."

"I can wait," Nancy offered, still playing along. She lowered her voice and whispered, "But say it again."

He brought his head back up, cupped her face so he could see her beautiful blue eyes, and rattled off the phrase once more. "I'm completely and unfathomably in love with you, Nancy."

"I love you more," she countered back.

Not the first time she had tried to make that claim.

"Not even possible, but I appreciate that you think that."

Notes for the Chapter:

I finally managed to get the last little bit of the story written to wrap it up. Thanks for reading! I appreciate all the comments :)